

Low Anthropology
Proper 19: James 3

Harrison Scott Key teaches writing at SCAD in Savannah, Georgia. His memoir *The World's Largest Man* won the Thurber Prize for Humor. *Southern Living* described Key as a cross between Flannery O'Connor and Jerry Seinfeld.

In an essay entitled *Confessions of a Bad Christian*, Harrison Scott Key fesses up:

“The rumors are true. I am a Christian. I go to church. There, I said it.

Let me begin this confession by apologizing to my godless friends: I know you’re worried about me. I know a respected atheist scholar who thinks I’m insane because I believe the Christmas story actually happened in space and time.

I’ve known many young mothers who are virgins, [in the South] we call them “Baptists.” But I’m not here to preach the Virgin Birth or cite studies showing how weekly church attendance reduces gingivitis. I’m here to confess.

I may be a Christian, but I am a very bad one.

I’m not good at that honeysuckle sweet Christianity that treats Jesus like a baby kitten who says church is silly and all you need is to love your neighbor. I don’t love my neighbors. I can’t even tell you their names.

One is named Janet or Joy or Cheryl, and she has two loud tiny dogs that I pray will soon die. She is too old to be cutting her grass, and I should volunteer to help her mow it, because one day she is going to die out there in the yard. But I don’t help, because she derives great pride from her independence, I internally surmise, based on absolutely zero evidence.

I’m not even good at the social justice Christianity that longs to affect change with protests and placards featuring clever genital puns. I don’t march in the Women’s March or the Pro-Life Parade or the Pro-Death Parade. I marched once in a Pirate Parade and instantly regretted it, and I am ashamed.

I am ashamed that I find it hard to hunger and thirst for righteousness, as Jesus says I should. Remember everybody standing with Standing Rock? I envy people who cultivate informed, nuanced positions of righteous anger. I barely have

time to mow my grass. I stand with a lawnmower, and I push it, after which I hunger and thirst for food and water.

If I find matters of social justice so boring, why do I persist in believing in a God who showed the greatest compassion for the downcast? Fair question. Pray for me. It will have to be you who does the praying. I start in praying about a friend's fragile marriage and in a second or two, I'm wondering why Amazon makes it so difficult to return gifts.

I'm a bad Christian— we all are in various states of lapse and relapse.”

If you were looking for reliably good Christians, James's congregation in Jerusalem should be ground zero for Christian perfection.

Think about to whom James is writing. The church in Jerusalem, these were first generation Christians.

We know from the Book of Acts that James himself was the leader of the “Circumcision Party.” You think the Methodist cross-and-flame logo is a problematic image for a denomination that started in the 1960’s South?

“Circumcision Party” has got to be the worst branding in the history of the Church. Still, it says more than a bit about their commitment.

The Christians in this congregation in Jerusalem—their faith was so intense, their discipleship was so earnest that grownup Gentiles among them got circumcised for Jesus. Of all the possible places, you’d think you’d find “good Christians” here in James’ congregation.

Don’t forget, they were ringside to redemption. The proof doubting Thomas had demanded in order to believe they all received.

Like James, some of these Christians in Jerusalem had encountered the Risen Christ, face-to-face and hand-to-hole-in-the-hand. They’d eaten breakfast with the Risen Christ.

If anything could get you to take the log out of your own eye, you'd think it would be the crucified Christ (who's no longer dead) sitting across a fire from you and passing you sausages.

These Christians— their faith was such that after Easter, almost overnight, they broke the greatest commandment and started to worship James' brother as the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

Blaspheming the sabbath had gotten Jesus strung up on a tree, but almost immediately after Easter these Christians wantonly violated the fourth commandment by worshipping Jesus not on the sabbath but on Sunday.

I mean, they even pooled all their money together and shared it with one another—that's not Bernie Sanders; that's the Book of Acts.

These were not your lukewarm believers. You'd expect them to be *good* Christians. They'd experienced Pentecost firsthand. The Holy Spirit had fallen on them like tongues of fire, and yet their own tongues set blaze after consuming blaze.

James says today that we cannot do the one thing God in the Garden gave to us to do. In the beginning, God gave us to name every living creature, and then God gave us dominion over all of them and we did a pretty good job of it.

We managed to tame every kind of beast and bird, every sort of sea creature and reptile. We have tamed every last creature except the beast inside of us.

We can charm even a snake, but we cannot control our own forked tongues.

“You bless God and you curse others with the same mouth, setting off fire after fire,” James judges the church.

“Your tongue is a world of iniquity, James says, it stains the whole body.”

“This ought not to be so,” James concludes in verse ten.

Notice—

James, who is a moralist, doesn't lay down the Law.
James doesn't write: You ought not to be this way.

James doesn't offer: Here's some advice to get your act together.
He doesn't give them 3 easy steps to tame their tongue.

He just says: "This ought not to be so."

St. James here sounds like St. Paul when Paul describes the Christian life after baptism.

"I do not understand my own actions," Paul writes after Romans 6, "the one thing I want to do is the very thing I do not do, and the very thing I do not want to do is what I do."

Both of them sound like Martin Luther describing the life of discipleship as a never-ending return to our baptism.

This ought not to be so, James says.
As though to say: *This will always be true of you*.

Harrison Scott Key, St. Paul, Martin Luther, the believers in James' congregation—when it comes to being *bad* Christians, they're in good company.

In the days before indoor plumbing and cold showers, St. Francis of Assisi rolled naked in the snow to stave off his dirty, lusty thoughts—just imagine that as a statue in your garden. St. Mary of Egypt was a prostitute for 17 years. St. Bernard led the 2nd Crusade. My Mt. Rushmore hero, Karl Barth, had a live-in mistress his whole life—in addition to his wife. John Wesley preached about Christian perfection and growing in holiness, but even he never stopped being anxious about his salvation and in the name of piety left his family destitute when he died.

This ought to be so.

If you were searching for some *good* Christians, you'd start with saints like these, yet even the best Christians aren't all that reliably good.

Mary Karr is another funny, Flannery O'Connor type writer. About her own conversion to Christianity, she writes: "After years of being a Christian I realized one day I only wanted to kill some of the people on the subway in the

morning; whereas, before I was a Christian I wanted to kill every single one of them.”

What Mary Karr expresses there in her lessened inclination to murder is the Protestant doctrine *simul iustus et peccator*. Again, whenever the Church whips out its Latin you know it’s important so pay attention.

Simul iustus et peccator is a fancy catchphrase meaning “at once justified and a sinner.”

That is, we are always simultaneously (*simul*) sinful and yet justified by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone. *Simul iustus et peccator*.

As that black-and-white television gangster tells Kevin in *Home Alone*: “We’re never no better than angels with dirty wings.” You dear faithful—though you are baptized believers, you do not ever advance appreciably beyond being what Harrison Scott Key calls “fools in varying states of lapse and relapse.”

Notice—

This doesn’t make you a *bad* Christian.
It makes you a Christian.

St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that the message of Christianity is foolishness to the Greeks—foolishness because they expected that the Gospel should give them what Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle had given them.

Morality. Ethics. Teaching.

Christianity was foolishness because they expected the Gospel to give them a philosophy, a manual, a way of life.

Christianity was foolishness because they were looking to grow in goodness.

In order to find happiness.
In order to tame the tongue.
In order to live your best life now.

Christianity was absolute foolishness to the Greeks because Christianity is not about good people getting better.

Christianity is not about good people getting better.

Christianity is about bad people coping with their failures to be good.

Christianity is not about good people getting better.

Christianity is about bad people holding on for dear life—literally, for life—to the promise that God in Jesus Christ has met you in your failures to be good.

And God has forgiven you.

God has met you in your failure to love your neighbor as yourself.

God has met you in your failure to give generously to the poor.

God has met you in your failure to be a good mother, to be a loving husband, to be a patient sister, or a compassionate son, or a good boss, or an understanding daughter.

God has met you in your failure to tame your two-faced tongue and God has said: “You know not what you’re doing. I forgive you.”

I know what some of you are thinking: *Christianity isn’t about good people getting better, it’s about bad people coping with their failures to be good—that can’t be all there is to being a Christian?! Even the Boy Scouts manage to make more sense. They’ve got “Do a Good Turn Daily” as their slogan. There’s got to be more to being a Christian, right? It can’t all be grace. It can’t be grace and nothing but grace—so help me, that would be foolishness. In order to be a good Christian, surely there’s stuff we should do.*

Of course, I’d argue that as soon as you attach a “should” to grace it’s no longer grace, but that’s a debate for another day.

In the meantime, I’ll see your questions, and I’ll raise you.

I’ll ask my own question: Just how is it, do you think, that a religion based on acknowledging our *own* sins and faults and shortcomings has become virtually synonymous with judgmentalism and self-righteousness and hypocrisy?

How is it that good news for sinners has become bad news for so many?

How is it that what Jesus says is medicine for the sin-sick tastes like poison?

How is it that his yoke feels hard and his burden heavy?

How is it that the Great Physician has gotten wrapped up in a Judge's robe?

Is it because when you circumscribe Christianity to a religion of good people getting better—or just people becoming good—it's not long before you're telling people to do better, be better, which inevitably sounds like "I'm better than you."

Or worse, "You're not good enough."

Good enough for God.

This isn't an abstract issue.

I've been a pastor for over 20 years. You know how many atheists I've encountered who've told me "Oh Christianity, it's just too merciful for me, too gracious?"

Goose egg.

You know how many I've met who've written us off because we're the opposite?

Too many to count.

Christianity is endangered in our culture because of a self-inflicted wound.

If you don't believe me, notice.

Notice how we distinguish *good* Christians from *bad* Christians based—not on their trust in the promise of the Gospel—but upon behavior, morality, deeds. And we do this on the Left and the Right, conservative and liberal alike.

Notice how we define a *good* Christian versus a *bad* Christian based upon obedience to scripture's commands or adherence to Christ's teachings.

In other words: to the Law.

But the purpose of the Law, scripture says, is to shut our mouths up.

In repentance and humility.

No human can tame the tongue, scripture says.

But the purpose of God's Law— Old Testament and New— is to shut us up.

The first step in being a good Christ-following Christian— and, for Greeks like you, it'll likely take you a lifetime to learn— is knowing that Christ has to carry you most of the way.

"I used to be a good Christian," Harrison Scott Key writes in his *Confessions of a Bad Christian*.

In my boyhood, I was attentive in Sunday school and sang songs about the devil without irony. I was a good boy back then, and longed to be loved for my goodness. And then, around puberty, something happened to transform me into a bad Christian, in addition to puberty."

Harrison Scott Key was asked to help a little blind boy find his way to the sanctuary. He was so caught up in thoughts of his own goodness, he walked the blind boy face-first in the floor-mounted drinking fountain.

Key confesses:

"The experience permanently fractured my belief in the purity of my intentions. It would take me years to understand this fact, but the understanding commenced in that church hallway: that a good human being is a temporary and imaginary creature, that even the best of us can believe ourselves gods, and that we are all fools, in various states of lapse and relapse.

I am grateful to the thing we call God for that enduring awareness of my tendency to forget I am no god, not even close, which is what allows me, if not to do good in every moment and for the right end, at least to spot the good from far off and pray for the strength to walk in that direction.

If there's one thing my long internship at Jesus Enterprises, LLC, has taught me, it's that I should be much more watchful of what's inside me than what's inside you. That is where we have to start."

The irony?

Just like the owners of those untamed tongues in James's Church, the author of *Confessions of a Bad Christian*, he's actually good one.

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